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Student satisfaction and student perceptions of quality at international branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates

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The international branch campus has emerged as a popular form of transnational higher education but to date little research has been undertaken on student perceptions and experiences, other than the student feedback evaluations conducted by institutions. This research employed a survey questionnaire to investigate student perceptions of study at international branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the country which hosts the largest number of branch campuses globally. Across the seven dimensions examined – programme effectiveness, quality of lecturers and teaching, student learning, assessment and feedback, learning resources, use of technology, and facilities/social life – it was found that students are largely satisfied. The findings refute many of the criticisms of international branch campuses in the literature, regarding quality, political or ideological issues.

Keywords: international branch campuses; student perceptions; quality; student satisfaction; United Arab Emirates

Introduction

Since the turn of the century, the international branch campus has emerged as a popular form of transnational education with both higher education institutions (HEIs) and students (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). An international branch campus is an educational facility where students receive face-to-face instruction in a country different to that of the parent institution. Two features distinguish branch campuses from other forms of transnational education that also adopt a physical ‘bricks and mortar’ approach: first, a branch campus operates under the same name as its parent institution, and second, the qualifications that the students gain bear the name of the parent institution (Wilkins, 2010). Lawton and Katsomitros (2012) report the existence of 200 international branch campuses worldwide, of which 37 are in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE has more international branch campuses than any other country and the majority of these are located in the Emirate of Dubai, one of the seven emirates in the UAE federation. Nearly half of all international branch campuses globally belong to institutions based in the United States (US), Australia or United Kingdom (UK) (Lane, 2011).

Critics of international branch campuses have questioned the ability of branches to offer a curriculum and institutional culture that is consistent with what is present at the main campuses (Wood, 2011). Regulatory bodies in host countries typically require international branch campuses to deliver the same programmes and adhere to the same standards and

procedures that apply at their home campuses. However, Altbach (2010) claims that the total product offerings of international branch campuses rarely come close to the home products in terms of breadth of curriculum, quality of academic staff, physical environment, learning resources and social facilities. Although the products of Western universities may be of the highest quality in their home countries, they might not satisfy the needs or interests of stakeholders in other countries (Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Some branch campuses have experienced difficulty recruiting high quality lecturers and students. Competition for students and the need to achieve recruitment targets has led some branch campuses to admit students who would not have been accepted onto the same programme at the institution's main home campus (Altbach, 2010).

Most international branch campuses are relatively new and therefore they have not yet had enough time to develop the scale needed to replicate the home campus offering. Branch campuses typically offer a limited curriculum and very often specialise in subjects such as business, management and information technology, which are relatively cheap to establish and which can easily accommodate high student numbers. Many branch campuses lack the range of physical facilities and services found on home campuses, such as libraries housing extensive collections, sports and leisure facilities, student accommodation, specialist careers advice and support, and extra-curricular activities. It is interesting therefore to discover how students at international branch campuses rate their experiences as learners and customers of these institutions.

Much of the previous research on transnational higher education has focussed on the effectiveness of teaching and learning, but little attention has been given to student attitudes, beliefs and experiences (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010). As the main stakeholders in higher education, it is logical to research the student perspective. HEIs must achieve student satisfaction in order to gain competitive advantage, and with pressure on institutions to increase student enrolments and retention, the emphasis placed on a positive student experience has become much greater (Arambewela, 2010). Furthermore, achieving positive word of mouth from current students and alumni is a vital element of every institution's promotional mix.

Miliszewska and Sztendur (2010) undertook a study that investigated student views on various dimensions of Australian transnational education programmes in South East Asia, which included curriculum and instruction design, lecturers and teaching, use of technology, evaluation and assessment, programme management and organisational support. The findings were intended to help HEI managers in reviewing existing transnational provision and planning new transnational ventures and programmes. This research has similar objectives, but it was not limited to institutions and programmes from a single country and it was conducted in the UAE, the country with the largest number of international branch campuses globally, but also a country that has seen relatively little academic research into its transnational higher education.

The main purpose of this study is to shed light on the student experiences at international branch campuses (in the UAE), and to discover the extent to which students are satisfied with their institutions and courses. The findings are intended to provide useful information to institutional managers, who can then implement strategies to bring about improvement. The paper is structured as follows. First, the concept of service quality is discussed, as well as existing methods of achieving student feedback. Then, the survey method is explained. After this, the results are presented, followed by a discussion of issues

in several areas of the student experience. Finally, the conclusion is presented, in which the findings are summarised and the implications examined.

Service quality

As students evaluate service quality, they typically cannot help but compare the performance they experience with the performance they expected (Wright & O'Neill, 2002, Clewes, 2003). Therefore, expectations provide the baseline for the assessment of a customer's level of satisfaction. Zeithaml et al. (1990) found that consumer expectations are influenced by the consumer's individual needs, word of mouth communications, other external communications and price. The expectations of some students are influenced by non-institutionally sanctioned sources, such as the student evaluation website *RateMyProfessors.com*, which students access to gain information on institutions, teaching quality and lecturer performance, or to express their views and opinions (Wilkins & Epps, 2011).

The SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman et al. (1988), which compares service performance against expectations, has been one of the most commonly used to measure service quality. However, it has been criticised by many researchers for poor reliability and validity (Clemes et al., 2007). Cronin and Taylor (1992) developed the SERVPREF instrument as an alternative to SERVQUAL, which ignores expectations and measures only customers' experiences. Several researchers have found that SERVPREF performs better than SERVQUAL (Clemes et al, 2007).

This research, apart from following a SERVPREF approach, focuses on the assessment of the total student experience. It is now universally accepted that student satisfaction results from the total student experience and not just from quality in teaching and learning (Wright & O'Neill, 2002). The campus environment is a web of interconnected experiences that overlap and influence students' overall satisfaction; what happens in the classroom is not independent of all other experiences relating to campus life (Elliott & Shin, 2002).

Feedback can be collected from students using a wide variety of methods (Brennan et al., 2003). Many HEIs attempt to assess their service quality by measuring student satisfaction using internally created and distributed student evaluation and feedback surveys, but surveys that collect information on the 'total student experience' (i.e. which are not course or subject specific) are still relatively rare (Williams & Kane, 2009). Some HEIs now attempt to measure and improve service quality through the adoption of total quality management (TQM) techniques and the achievement of quality awards (Quinn et al., 2009). In some countries, nationally organised/coordinated surveys have been introduced, such as the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire and the National Student Survey in the UK. Although these surveys have been (to an extent) popular with students, parents and the media (for example, to help compile institutional rankings), critics often claim that these surveys do little to improve the student experience or quality in HEIs (e.g. Harvey, 2008).

Method

This study utilised a questionnaire developed by the authors, which consisted of 49 items relating to student perceptions, experiences and satisfaction. Parts of scales were taken or adapted from various studies on quality and student satisfaction, e.g. Wright & O'Neill, 2002; Clewes, 2003; Mai, 2005; Douglas et al., 2006; Alves & Raposo, 2009; Denson et al., 2010; Gibson, 2010; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010, and item development was also aided by examination of similar surveys such as the UK National Student Survey and the Times

Higher Education student experience survey (HEFCE, 2010; THE, 2011). Given that quality and student satisfaction in transnational higher education has been little studied, there was no single scale that could be adopted in its entirety. Therefore, each of our scales used items from multiple sources. Wherever possible, items were made relevant to transnational education and the UAE context. Each item was randomly placed on the questionnaire to encourage respondents to consider each question individually. A further four items collected data about the respondents: their gender, nationality, level of study and the country that accredited their high school qualification(s).

Of the items, 46 used a 7-point rating scale where 1 = disagree strongly and 7 = agree strongly. The questionnaire finished with three open questions, which asked respondents to identify advantages and disadvantages of studying at a branch campus in the UAE (as opposed to studying at universities located in countries such as Australia, the UK and US), and to identify the differences they experienced between their secondary education and the system of education/learning that they received in their higher education undertaken at an international branch campus. The survey questionnaire was completed by respondents using hard copies or an online version.

The survey questionnaire was completed by students who were studying at an international branch campus in the UAE. These 'full service' branch campuses offer complete undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. There is one peculiarity that is common to several of the countries that host a number of international branch campuses: their populations consist of high proportions of expatriates and foreign workers. In 2010, nearly 26 per cent of Singapore's population was made up of non-residents (foreigners who were working, studying or living in Singapore but not granted permanent residence) (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2010). Most of the Arab Gulf States have populations with even greater proportions of expatriates. For example, over 80 per cent of the UAE's population is composed of expatriates and foreign workers (UAE Interact, 2009). Expatriates, therefore, account for high proportions of the total enrolments at UAE branch campuses.

This research was originally intended as a cross-institution collaboration, but all of the institutions approached eventually declined our offer to participate in the study. As a result, we decided to distribute our questionnaire using students of a capstone project at an international branch campus in the Emirate of Dubai. A capstone project is a final year undergraduate subject – in this case Marketing – that has a report on a particular topic embedded in it, which synthesises all knowledge accumulated in previous subjects studied. Students posted the survey link on their Facebook accounts and sent personal emails to all of their friends in the UAE who study at an international branch campus. The questionnaire informed respondents how the data was going to be used and students completing the capstone project gave their consent for us to use the data they obtained.

The questionnaires were distributed over a five-week period in February/March 2011, generating 247 usable responses. Of the 247 respondents, 51.4 per cent were males, 48.6 per cent females, 65.2 per cent undergraduates and 34.8 per cent postgraduates. The most popular nationalities were Indian (31.6 per cent), Pakistani (22.2 per cent), UAE (13.0 per cent) and African (7.3 per cent), followed by Iranian, Jordanian, Lebanese, Russian and Syrian. On the basis of gender, level of study and nationality, our sample is broadly representative of the higher education student population in Dubai, except that branch campuses attract fewer UAE nationals, because they tend to go to the federal/state universities where they pay no fees (KHDA, 2010).

Most branch campuses do not publish data relating to student profiles, but from those that do, such as the University of Wollongong in Dubai (UOWD, 2012), the representativeness of our sample is confirmed. Thus, we believe that our sample is representative of students enrolled at the large, Western-based multi-discipline institutions. The most popular secondary education curriculums followed were Indian (23.1 per cent), UAE (20.6 per cent), British (15.8 per cent), Pakistani (5.6 per cent) and American (5.3 per cent). Over 85 per cent of the respondents were following a programme in business, management or computer science/information technology, and most of the respondents came from one of just six institutions. Due to the fact that many of the branch campuses in Dubai are very small and specialised operations, these six large institutions account for over one third of all branch campus enrolments in Dubai.

Results and discussion

Student perceptions of their experience of study at an international branch campus were assessed against seven dimensions (adapted from the literature, see e.g. Telford & Masson, 2005; Douglas et al., 2006; Alves & Raposo, 2009; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010): programme effectiveness; quality of lecturers and teaching; student learning; assessment and feedback; learning resources; use of technology; and facilities/quality of social life. Each of the dimensions had between three and six questionnaire items. Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The alpha values ranged from .83 to .92, satisfying the minimum .70 recommended by Nunnally (1978). The mean scores awarded by students for each of the seven dimensions, and the standard deviations, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Student scores for their perceptions of study at an international branch campus in the United Arab Emirates

Dimension	Mean ^a	Standard deviation
Programme effectiveness	4.98	1.39
Quality of lecturers and teaching	4.96	1.36
Student learning	4.95	1.36
Assessment and feedback	5.02	1.38
Learning resources	4.99	1.35
Use of technology	5.03	1.37
Facilities and quality of social life	5.04	1.36

^a On a 7-point rating scale where 1 = disagree strongly and 7 = agree strongly.

Across all of the dimensions examined in this study, the scores awarded by respondents indicates that branch campuses in the UAE are performing relatively well and largely satisfying their principle customers, the students. Of course, the managements of international branch campuses should not become complacent. Transnational higher education has become very competitive and the expectations of stakeholders – students, parents, employers, governments – are ever increasing. A study conducted in the UK found that certain aspects of student satisfaction changed over time (Kane et al., 2008).

Five items were used to assess overall student satisfaction and the results are shown in Table 2. The scores of these five items were then averaged to create an overall satisfaction

score for each student. The Kruskal-Wallis test (which compares three or more categories of a nominal variable) was used to assess whether there are differences in the satisfaction scores of students of different nationality and the Mann-Whitney U test (used when a nominal variable has only two categories) was used to assess whether there were differences in the satisfaction scores of undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Table 2. Indicators of student satisfaction with their experience at an international branch campus in the United Arab Emirates

Indicator	% students agreeing with statement ^a
So far, my course has met all of my expectations	64.4%
I am very satisfied with my university and would definitely choose it again	66.5%
My choice of university was a wise decision	72.0%
My programme offers good value for money	65.6%
I would recommend my university to friends	67.3%

^a Scores of 5-7 on the 7-point rating scale

The descriptive statistics revealed that Indian students had the highest satisfaction scores, followed by Pakistani students and then African students; UAE students had the lowest satisfaction scores. The Kruskal-Wallis test indicated however that these differences in satisfaction between the groups was not significant ($p = .47$). In India, higher education and higher education teachers are both generally highly respected (Smith, 2009). Previous research has indicated that students who achieve lower grades often award lower lecturer/course evaluations (Wilkins & Epps, 2011), and given that this study found that the students who had completed their education in a UAE state school tended to find their higher education course more academically challenging than other students suggests that the UAE students might have been achieving lower grades.

The descriptive statistics indicated that postgraduate students had awarded higher satisfaction scores than undergraduate students, but the Mann-Whitney U test found that this difference was not significant either ($p = .10$). A high proportion of postgraduate students at UAE branch campuses study on a part-time basis and take professional programmes, primarily for career advancement. It is possible that these students are less concerned with the resources and facilities of their institution, or the use of technology, but more with the value that their education will bring to their careers.

Programme effectiveness

Programme effectiveness can be assessed on both a 'use' basis (its relevance to actual work) and 'exchange' basis (the ability to use the end qualification to gain a better job, higher pay, further education etc.). The respondents' assessments of their programme's use and exchange values were mainly favourable. Typical comments include: "My course will provide me with all the knowledge I need to get a good job in human resource management"; "You get the same quality of education without having to leave Dubai or

your family”; “You get the brand name on the degree, which is respected by employers, without having to study at the main campus”.

Many students are motivated to study at an international branch campus because they believe that local employers prefer them over other local institutions or because they believe that an international education and a foreign qualification will better prepare them for a career in the international labour market (Zimitat, 2008; Wilkins, 2011). Although the students’ comments suggest that they believe their programmes offer good use and exchange values, they only agreed moderately that course content was made relevant to the UAE (mean score = 4.68), that their programme was intellectually stimulating (mean score = 4.89), and that their course was relevant to their intended future employment (mean score = 5.37).

By their very nature, transnational programmes are designed in countries other than the ones in which they are delivered. Some institutions might be tempted to deliver at international branch campuses ‘off-the-shelf’ standardised programmes with generic content that is irrelevant or inappropriate in local contexts (Naidoo, 2007; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010). Indeed, some institutions package their curricula by providing teaching staff at branch campuses with standardised syllabi, learning objectives, student reading lists, lecture slides and notes, and assessment tasks (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). Pre-packaged material can be a useful teaching and learning tool, providing a solid base for a programme, which can be developed and refined over time. However, Schapper and Mayson (2004) argue that standardised programmes rob academics of professional autonomy, professional judgement and intellectual engagement, and that they stifle creativity.

Although local employers may prefer higher education programmes to be contextualised for the local environment, students often enrol at international branch campuses specifically to receive an international education (Pyvis & Chapman, 2004; Dobos, 2011). However, Wang (2008) argues that it is important for institutions to not impose cultural colonialism and the indiscriminate use of western theories upon offshore academics and students. Ziguras (2008) suggests that it is important for lecturers to put theories into perspective for students so that they can relate them to their own experiences and social contexts. A study by Shams and Huisman (2011) concluded that localizing the curriculum while at the same time trying to offer identical courses and learning experiences to students at home and branch campuses is one of the biggest challenges facing transnational HEIs.

Quality of lecturers and teaching

The respondents were broadly satisfied with the performances of their lecturers and the quality of teaching they received. It is notable that for the item ‘My lecturers are experts in their fields’ the modal score awarded was 7. This indicates that students in the UAE generally have high respect for their teachers, which might to some extent be considered a cultural norm in the UAE. It is important to note two types of lecturer expertise: subject knowledge and application to the local context. The latter might be particularly valued by postgraduate students, many of whom study professional subjects with career enhancement as a primary motive. This indicates the importance of employing faculty with sound local knowledge and experience.

The vast majority of higher education lecturers in the UAE are recruited from other countries (Saafin, 2008), usually from other Arab nations, the US, Europe, Australia, India

and Pakistan (Randeree, 2008), but some lecturers are employed locally from the existing expatriate workforce, often on a part-time or fixed period basis. Some of the smaller branch campuses employ relatively high proportions of locally contracted part-time teaching staff, which may represent an effective method of reducing costs, but less effective as a method of achieving employee commitment and higher levels of involvement (Wilkins, 2010).

There are advantages and disadvantages of employing local staff as opposed to expatriate teachers from the country of origin of the institution. On the one hand, many students (and parents) expect that if they enrol on a foreign programme they will be taught by lecturers from that country, but academics employed locally often have a better understanding of student needs and are better able to make course content relevant to the local context (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007). In a survey of students undertaking Australian transnational programmes in South East Asia, it was found that in programmes taught by both university and local instructors, students reported higher overall satisfaction with the university lecturers (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010).

Academics in transnational education work in environments that are very different to those of their home countries. Classroom culture and the extent and style of student-staff interaction can vary considerably across countries as can students' preferred learning styles (Mahrous & Ahmed, 2010). Many institutions fail to give academics starting their first assignment in transnational education any significant training to prepare them for offshore teaching, such as advice and guidance on pedagogical issues or country-specific issues and differences (Dunn & Wallace, 2006; McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Getty, 2011). It is however beneficial for staff to understand the local culture and traditions, such as religious customs and family relationships and expectations, so as not to offend students and to appreciate the factors that might affect student performance. A study conducted by Saafin (2008) in the UAE identified teacher characteristics and practices that higher education students judged to be effective, which included treating students with respect; being flexible and willing to compromise; being helpful; being friendly with students; having a sense of humour; helping students understand; giving students the chance to speak and ask questions; being dedicated and knowledgeable of his/her subject; and being patient and fair.

Student learning

Most of the branch campuses in the UAE possess diverse student populations, which presents both advantages and disadvantages. In the open question about advantages of studying at a branch campus in the UAE, 13 students (5.3 per cent of respondents) specifically mentioned the attractions of a diverse student (and staff) population, e.g., "My university has an international crowd so you can get to learn about different cultures". However, the diverse range of secondary educations that students have undertaken sometimes makes the teaching task more complex and difficult. Students who have completed a UK or US secondary education (21.1 per cent of respondents) are likely to have experience of student-centred learning, writing essays and preparing coursework. In contrast, cultural and historical traditions, as well as the teaching methodologies used in UAE secondary education generally lead UAE students (20.6 per cent of the respondents) to expect to be passive recipients of taught information and to not have to adopt an independent approach to learning and problem solving (Randeree, 2006). The norm in state schools is for the teacher to state facts that must be memorised and regurgitated by

students (Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005). Virtually all of the teaching at international branch campuses in the UAE is conducted in the English language. A student's ability to read and write fluently in English usually has a significant impact on their overall academic attainment (and level of satisfaction).

The Kruskal-Wallis test was used to assess how students who had achieved secondary qualifications accredited in different countries perceived the differences between their secondary and higher education. The results show that there are significant differences between the groups' perceptions about having to work more independently at university than they had to at school [$H(5) = 18.87, p < .01$] and the extent to which their higher education course is academically challenging [$H(5) = 10.88, p < .05$]. Examination of the mean scores revealed that students who had completed their secondary education in a UAE state school had awarded higher scores for both items than students who had achieved Indian, Pakistani, UK or US secondary qualifications.

Some of the comments made by respondents illustrate the differences between their secondary education and their higher education at an international branch campus: "In high school we learnt more theory and bookish information whereas the knowledge gained at university is more practical and useful in the corporate world"; "It's more interesting now but much more challenging"; and "I have had to learn to work more independently and in groups". The students participating in the study agreed that they received effective course materials and had access to sufficient learning/library resources to enable their learning and the development of skills.

Assessment and feedback

The respondents were generally satisfied with the organisation of assessment at their institutions although 20.7 per cent of students did not agree that they received detailed and helpful feedback on their work (scores of 1-3 on the 7-point rating scale). Many students want more time for consultation with lecturers to discuss assessment and related issues, and this highlights a benefit of employing full-time faculty, rather than 'fly-in' (lecturers from home campuses who teach at branches only in short intensive blocks) and part-time lecturers. Some 73.3 per cent of students thought that their course was much more demanding than their secondary education courses and 56.2 per cent of students perceived that it was difficult to get high marks on their course (scores of 5-7 on the 7-point rating scale).

The social culture of the Middle East emphasises social status and reputation, and students (and their families) often expect to achieve qualifications regardless of their ability or effort applied. Altbach (2010) suggests that many students studying at international branch campuses would probably not have been accepted onto the same programme at the institution's main home campus. Once enrolled, there often exists considerable pressure on academics to satisfy students by giving them inflated grades (McBurnie & Ziguras, 2007; Wilkins, 2010).

A survey conducted in the UAE revealed that many professors believed their students had average or below average ability in mathematics and writing in English, and that students were awarded higher grades than they deserved (Gerson, 2010). Poor course evaluations, complaining students and concerns over job security were identified by professors in the survey as some of the causes of grade inflation. As in other countries, plagiarism has become an increasing problem in UAE higher education, often the result of

naivety among students, where they consider the sharing of work to be merely co-operative and helpful rather than an unethical act (Randeree, 2006).

The design of assessment tasks and grading of students can be undertaken by either the parent institution or locally by faculty at the branch campus. When assessment is organised and undertaken locally, the moderation process undertaken at the parent institution ensures that assessment tasks and grading are fair and consistent across campuses. The moderation process is intended to ensure that student results are reliable and that the quality of assessing students' work is comparable (Dobos, 2011). The moderation process can be a major challenge for both parties as standards at offshore branches may vary from those at the parent campus (Castle & Kelly, 2004). When grading of coursework or examinations is undertaken at the parent campus then it usually takes longer to distribute the results to students, which can often lead to student dissatisfaction with the assessment process.

Learning resources

The survey found that students were generally satisfied with the learning resources available to them. Although many international branch campuses do have small libraries with fairly limited collections, students can usually order the books and resources that they require, and students at branch campuses have access to the same online journals and electronic resources offered at parent campuses. Students can use these online resources off-campus, which benefits most students given that the UAE has very high levels of Internet usage (Internet World Stats, 2011).

Some researchers regard the growth of transnational programmes as evidence of the commodification of higher education (Naidoo, 2003, 2007). Since commodified systems tend to be lean systems that emphasise cost minimisation, it might be expected that investment in libraries and learning resources fall below international norms (Naidoo, 2007). Our findings suggest that students at branch campuses have realistic expectations of what to expect.

Use of technology

The respondents were largely satisfied with the information and communication technology (ICT) facilities provided in teaching rooms, with their lecturers' use of ICT, with the availability of computers for personal use and the provision of online learning resources for use outside of lessons. ICT has become a common teaching and learning tool used by both academics and students worldwide. Western higher education has increasingly depended on ICT to achieve independent student-centred learning. Students of secondary school age in virtually all developed countries, including those in the Middle East, now have high levels of ICT skills. Although UAE nationals generally have good ICT skills, many still prefer a structured learning environment where they are directed by their teachers rather than engaging themselves in independent, autonomous learning. Most international branch campuses are located in higher education hubs – cities, countries or designated zones in countries – but what these countries have in common (e.g. Malaysia, Singapore, UAE) is the desire to develop as knowledge economies and to increase the participation of nationals in the labour market. Personality traits such as being proactive, autonomous and creative are associated with successful knowledge economies and this fact offers support for pedagogy that promotes student-centred learning.

ICT plays a large role in ensuring that the academic products of branch campuses remain comparable with those offered at parent campuses, as ICT provides students, regardless of their location, with the same sets of learning resources, e.g. access to academic journals. A study by Mahrous and Ahmed (2010) found that UK and US students rated computer simulation as a learning tool higher than students in Middle Eastern countries, possibly because Middle Eastern students have less experience of active learning using ICT, but the Middle Eastern students' rating for online communication with their teachers was higher than those of the UK and US students, possibly because Middle Eastern students suffer higher levels of anxiety over their study and therefore value more one-to-one help with problems and difficulties, and quick feedback.

Facilities and quality of social life

The respondents generally judged that their institutions provided a good range of facilities for sports, recreation and leisure with 65.9 per cent of students believing that there was a lively social scene on their campus (scores of 5-7 on the 7-point rating scale). As most of these students have not studied at a Western home campus before they therefore have no benchmark on which to base a comparison, and what a UAE female student considers lively might equally be considered dull by a European male student. Of the students who commented negatively on facilities or social life, over 60 per cent of the comments could be related to the lack of scale of branch campuses, e.g., "We miss the full student experience of a bigger campus and it doesn't feel like studying at an international university".

Gibson (2010) found that although access to and quality of campus services and facilities were important to student satisfaction, they were less important than the academic attributes. Over the last decade, the desires and expectations of many students in higher education have increased, and the growth of higher education hubs such as Singapore and the UAE has created highly competitive markets where many institutions feel the need to differentiate themselves from the crowd by offering additional services and facilities. Eldridge and Cranston (2009) found that students in some countries perceived the social aspect of education as more important than students in other countries. Many of the students in transnational higher education study professional vocational programmes such as business management or information technology, and improving their future career prospects is their primary goal. It is possible that these students prefer to focus on their study and not be distracted by recreational and social activities. Also, the customs and cultures of various Middle Eastern and South Asian communities may deter female students from participating in social activities, particularly those that may involve interaction with males.

Summary and conclusion

The results of the survey indicate that the main dimensions needing improvement are not related directly to teaching or learning. However, the items with the largest percentages of negative scores (disagreement with statements) were related to academic matters rather than to institutional facilities and quality of social life. Of the items relating to academic matters, there were only five that had relatively high proportions of negative scores (scores of 1-3 on the 7-point rating scale): 21.5 per cent of students did not agree that they had as much contact with their lecturers than they had with their teachers at school and 17.9 per cent disagreed that they had as much contact with their lecturers as they needed; 20.7 per cent of students disagreed that they received detailed and helpful feedback on their work;

18.7 per cent disagreed that their lecturers were sympathetic if they had problems that affected their work; and 17.8 per cent disagreed that their lecturers involved them in lessons more than their teachers at school.

All of the other items with relatively high proportions of negative scores fell into the 'facilities and quality of social life' category. Some 17.5 per cent of students did not agree that their university provides a lot of leisure activities and entertainment for students; 15.9 per cent disagreed that their university has a lot of clubs and societies for students; 15.8 per cent disagreed that there was a lively social scene on their campus; and 16.6 per cent disagreed that their university has a good careers advice and internships service.

Despite the large differences in cultural and educational backgrounds of the students, satisfaction scores by nationality and degree level do not differ significantly, suggesting that the branch campuses satisfactory cater for different clienteles. That said, there is scope for some improvement in specific areas. Regarding academic matters, feedback mechanisms can be improved and course content could be geared more to the UAE context. With respect to facilities, library services could be improved as well as career guidance.

Given that the total product offerings of international branch campuses rarely come close to the home products in terms of breadth of curriculum, quality of academic staff, physical environment, learning resources and social facilities, it might have been expected that student satisfaction at branch campuses would be lower than at home campuses. However, the findings of this study largely refute criticisms of international branch campuses found in the literature regarding quality and other issues, including political and ideological concerns (Naidoo, 2007; Becker, 2009; Romani, 2009; Donn & Al Manthri, 2010; Wilkins, 2010). In fact, the negative views expressed by the respondents are typical of those of higher education students all around the world, witnessed by the outcomes of surveys such as the Australian Course Experience Questionnaire and the National Student Survey in the UK. This implies that, in the students' eyes at least, the international branch campus as a model of higher education delivery does not have specific fundamental flaws. This is an interesting finding that goes somewhat to countering the arguments which criticise the international branch campus model of higher education.

Although it is acknowledged that the empirical base was relatively small, the findings indicate that students are generally (very) satisfied about what they have been offered, and this satisfaction relates to aspects of teaching and learning and to elements of the context in which they study (institutional facilities, social life, etc.). Furthermore, although this is one of the first studies to examine the phenomenon of student perceptions and satisfaction at branch campuses, it is not alone in reaching similar conclusions (see, for example, Miliszewska and Sztendur, 2010; Nair et al., 2011).

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